**Preached word effective and opposed** 13/8/23

Read: Romans 1:8-251Thessalonians 2,

Text: 1Thessalonians 2:13-16

Psalms: 95, 6, 79:9-13, 117

Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians is one of his most personal, and also most joyous letters. He is not writing to correct any particular errors or false teaching in the church, although they still had a lot to learn from the apostle concerning doctrine, and living to please God. Paul wrote after hearing from Timothy that these new converts were continuing in the faith. Persecution at the hands of the Jews that led to Paul leaving this city, continued. The rioting mob of Jews and others turned their attention to undermining the credibility of the apostle Paul in their effort to crush the infant church in Thessalonica. But the church continued on in faith and love (3:6).

Paul gave thanks to God for their faith, love, and hope in chapter 1, and continues thanking God here in chapter 2 because the preached word was working effectively in their hearts and lives. Our subheadings are, ‘Word received’, ‘Word at work’, ‘Willing to suffer’ and, ‘Wrath upon the Jews’.

**1. Word received and welcomed**

Despite all that Paul’s opponents were saying about him preaching for personal profit or fame, Paul insisted that he preached the gospel entrusted to him by God. He was given a solemn responsibility by God and he ministered so as to please God, not man. He called upon these Christians, and upon God himself, as witnesses to his devout and upright way of life (2:10).

He goes on to remind them, with thanks to God, of the way they received, and indeed welcomed, what he preached as the word of God. Not for a moment did they think Paul was preaching the word of man, some philosophy he had cleverly dreamt up to deceive innocent people. This was not uncommon in Paul’s day, and not uncommon today either. Just think of the Christian groups that hold to the teaching of some ’prophet’- we rightly call them sects. They claim to hold to the Bible, but the first book they offer you is not the Bible but a book written by their ‘prophet’.

The gospel which Paul preached is the Bible that we have today. We believe this Bible to be ‘in truth the word of God’, the inspired and infallible word of God (2:13, 2Tim 3:16). The preacher expounding this word of God is God’s instrument; God message is being brought to your hearing through him. As a young preacher I once invited people to come and hear ‘what Jesus has to say’, which was judged as going just a bit too far! As believers we also know and believe that this word is living and powerful because it has touched and changed our own heart (Heb 4:12).

**2. Word at work**

We have just referred to the words of Hebrews 4:12 which reads, ‘The word of God is living and powerful, sharper than any two-edged sword’; it is powerful to penetrate even the hardest of hearts. In Romans 1:16 Paul writes, ‘I am not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek’. Note what Paul says about Jews and Greeks because he will soon be speaking about the Jews and their ‘forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles’ (2:16). It is one thing to reject the gospel yourself but another to actively stop others hearing the gospel. As Christian parents you are denying your child the opportunity to hear the gospel if you are not bringing them to church regularly. Satan is trying hard to stop people hearing the gospel. He does this in many ways, including getting sport or parties scheduled for when churches are open for worship. Paul will speak about ‘Satan hindering us’ shortly (2:18).

Paul preached the word of God, and so must we. Why? Because it is the power of God unto salvation (Rom 1:16), and because it works effectually in the hearts of men and women, and boys and girls (2:13). In some churches the Bible reading is very brief, and not referred to in the sermon; in others there is no Bible reading at all! How can the word of God be effective if it is not read, and therefore not heard? As Paul says in Romans 10:14: ‘How shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?’

Have you heard the word of God preached? If not, please come and tell me. Better still, let me tell you the gospel now! The gospel truth is that Jesus, the Son of God, died according to the Scriptures, that he was buried and that he rose from the dead on the third day (1Cor 15:3, 4). These are the facts, the historical facts. Believe these facts, and then repent of your sins, believing that Christ died for your sin. If you repent your sins will be forgiven and you will become a new creation in Christ Jesus (2Cor 5:17). As a new creation you will receive the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, who worked in your heart to make the word of God effective (1:5). And when the Holy Spirit comes into your heart he comes to stay.

When Paul writes of ‘the word of God, which also effectively works’ he says ‘in you who believe’ (2:13). The Holy Spirit does not stop working when you believe, and you do not stop hearing and reading the word of God when you believe. Years ago when our children were young, a fellow missionary said he would tell them a story. When he started telling them a Bible story they said, ‘Not a Bible story; we have heard all the stories of the Bible’. The friend was understanding because they were just children, but some older Christians, think, and even say, that they know everything in the Bible- or maybe I just assume this because they say they don’t learn anything by coming to church!

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If you truly believe the word of God which you hear each week, and better still, that you also read each day, this word should be working effectively in your heart and your life. Compare yourself to the Thessalonian Christians if you will. They were new in the faith, with much to learn. I am sure they were still learning after many years, as I and others among you are.

The Thessalonians were facing affliction in the form of persecution, which does help explain their faith, their love, and their hope. Many of your brothers and sisters in Christ are facing affliction or persecution for their faith - do you care? Do you care that Jesus suffered and died for you? Are you ready to suffer for Him? As a believer you will suffer in this world. The world, the flesh, and the devil have you in their sights. Are you ready to defend yourself? Have you put on the armour of God and taken up the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God, and the rest of armour God provides (Eph 6:17). And do not forget the fellowship, in which we encourage one another to press on in faith, in love, and in hope.

**3. Willing to suffer**

We have been talking about the persecution the believers at Thessalonica were suffering. Addressing them as ‘brethren’, as brothers and sisters in Christ, Paul tells them that they were ‘imitators of the churches of God in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus’ (2:14). They were not the first church to be persecuted by the Jews- just look at the churches in Judea. We do not know a great deal about the churches in Judea but obviously the Thessalonians did because Paul told them they were imitating these churches.

Judea was the land of the Jews; it was where the Jews killed the Lord Jesus so was not an easy place for followers of Jesus to live and worship. Paul knew because as Paul the Pharisee he was very active in persecuting Christians- until he met the risen Jesus and became Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus. The persecutor became the persecuted. Satan did not like losing his star agent, so began stirring up other human agents against Paul. Yes, the Jews who rejected Jesus were called by Jesus children of the devil doing what their father did, namely reject the truth and murder those who proclaim the truth (John 8:44).

Paul had already expressed thanks to God for these Thessalonians becoming imitators of him and of the Lord (1:6). Now he thanks God for the way they were imitating fellow believers in Judea. Just as children imitate their parents, new believers tend to imitate more mature believers. Do you realise this, and accept your responsibility to set an example to new believers? Ultimately we point them to Christ, the one whom we imitate, just as Paul did (1Cor 11:1).

The churches in Judea would have consisted of Jewish converts in the main, while the Thessalonian church seems to have been made up of mainly Gentile converts (Acts17:4). Even so, the Jewish converts may have been the main target of persecution from the Jews. Paul writes to assure them that the suffering they were enduring from their countrymen or fellow Jews is what their fellow believers in Judea experienced when they believed. Paul was giving thanks to the Lord that ‘the gospel was so real in the lives of these people that they were willing to bleed for it’ writes one commentator.

Paul himself suffered at the hands of Jews; Thessalonica was not the first place in which they violently attacked him (2Cor 11:24-26). And he was not the first person they attacked. They were guilty of killing the Lord Jesus, as well as prophets sent by God (2:15, Acts 7:52). And they were continuing in their wicked ways by persecuting Paul and his partners in the gospel, as well as other believers in Judea and in Thessalonica. Clearly they were not pleasing God; they were zealous but not for the truth. Their zeal was aimed at self- righteousness through the law rather than true righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ (Phil 3:9). This misplaced zeal for the law was far from pleasing to God, or to other people; it made them ‘hostile to all men’ (2:15).

Saying that the Jews killed the Lord Jesus was not being anti-Semitic. Let no one use these words as an excuse for being anti-Semitic. Even so, Paul’s denunciation of his own countrymen in these three verses is unparalleled in the rest of his writings, indicating the depth of his feelings in this matter of persecution from the Jews. Paul, who was himself a Jew, was stating the facts. He was concerned for his countrymen, the Jews, knowing that the wrath of God was coming upon them. He was not concerned with making excuses, but for them to repent and believe as he did in the Lord Jesus Christ, the promised Messiah (Rom 9:3).

Like Paul, we pray for and preach the gospel to Jew and Gentile alike. But like Paul, and like Jesus himself, we warn them of the wrath of God to come. Indeed, Paul says that ‘wrath has come upon them to the uttermost’ (2:16). These Jews were not only persecuting fellow Jews who believed that Jesus of Nazareth is the promised Messiah; they also tried to stop Gentiles from hearing the gospel and being saved (2:16). In this way they were filling up the measure of their sins, or piling one sin upon another. Rejecting the gospel is one thing, but stopping others from hearing the gospel and being saved is another, a most sinister and serious sin.

The Jews, the ethnic group chosen by God to receive the Law and the prophets, and the very Son of God, will not escape the wrath of God, wrath revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who supress the truth in unrighteousness (Rom 1:18). The king of Babylon attacked and destroyed Jerusalem and the temple in 586BC because the Jews rebelled against God, turning to other gods and to immoral behaviour. History tells us that in AD70, just 20yrs after Paul wrote this letter, the Romans attacked Jerusalem and destroyed the temple, scattering the Jews once again. Was Paul prophesising this coming wrath of God in what he writes here in verse 16? Jesus was doing so when he spoke of the people of Jerusalem not knowing the day of their visitation (Luke 19:44).

Anyone, Jew or Gentile, who rejects the free offer of the gospel, the offer of forgiveness of sin and gift of righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ, will experience the wrath of God to the uttermost, his certain and complete judgment upon the wicked. The good news or the gospel is that anyone, Jew or Gentile, who receives the word of God and believes in Jesus Christ will escape the wrath to come (1:10) and know the grace of God in salvation and eternal joy.